

The Life of Ida B. Wells and Her Influence on Illinois

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It was 1863, African-American slaves had just heard about the Emancipation Proclamation and rejoiced that they were officially freed and had the basic rights of citizenship. A few years later there were African-American lawyers, businessmen and writers. Unfortunately, the Jim Crow Laws enforcing segregation were soon to come and make things much worse. As these matters began to unfold, a young woman named Ida B. Wells noticed the horrifying effects of these laws and decided to take action. Because of journalist Ida B. Wells' articles on lynching and segregation, readers in Illinois discovered the seriousness of these subjects, motivating them to action.

Ida B. Wells was born on July 16, 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi. At age sixteen, Ida lost both her parents and one of her brothers to yellow fever. Determined to keep the family together, Ida purposefully took the appearance of an older woman in order to become the guardian of her siblings. This situation molded Ida to become a courageous, strong woman. Also, Ida took a teaching job to help raise money to take care of her siblings.

Besides teaching, Ida began to take an interest in journalism as a young woman. In Memphis, Ida became a member of the Evening Star Literary Club and became the writer and editor of their journals. As a result of an article she wrote in the Memphis African-American newspaper, *Free Speech*, Ida lost her teaching job. The article criticized the poor Memphis school conditions and exposed an adulterous

minister. As a result, Ida made journalism her new career and started her lifelong crusade for justice. Soon, Ida became a columnist for *The Living Way* under the pen name “Iola.” Her column in *The Living Way* was picked up by newspapers in major cities, earning her the nickname “Princess of the Press.”

Not only did Ida fight for justice through her journalism, she showed it through political activism. When her close friend, a black man named Thomas Moss, built a grocery store across the street from a white man’s grocery store, his store began to get more business, eventually leading to a riot. Moss and his companions were unjustly jailed and a violent mob dragged them out of jail and lynched them. Because of this, Ida started to encourage fellow blacks to follow her and leave Memphis. Her pleadings met success as 6,000 blacks fled to other states such as Oklahoma, Missouri and Illinois.

In 1893, Ida moved to Chicago, Illinois, and her work gained even more importance. At the time, the World’s Columbian Exposition was to take place in Chicago. Every ethnic group was represented except African-Americans; Ida took a stand. She published the booklet *Reasons Why the Colored American is Not in the World’s Columbian Expedition*, along with co-authors Frederick Douglass and Ferdinand Barnett, a prominent Chicago attorney. Wells and Barnett were married on June 27, 1895. Just after a week of marriage Ferdinand sold the Chicago *Conservator*, an African-American newspaper, to Ida and she became head writer and editor.

Ida was now the first black woman in Illinois to have her own paper. True to form she used this opportunity to increase Illinoisans’ awareness of racial injustices

as she encouraged her readers to become leaders and take action to change the society that they lived in. The *Conservator* proved to be a successful influence for change when another paper, the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, followed its example and became Illinois' first white-owned newspaper to denounce lynchings. The *Inter-Ocean* hired Ida as a journalist and one of her assignments was to investigate the race riots in East St. Louis, Illinois. She documented the victims' stories in a pamphlet entitled, *The East St. Louis Massacre, the Greatest Outrage of the Century*.

Working for the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* in 1894, she was sent to England to speak out against lynchings. She hoped that the British clergy would speak out; they did and they published her work. After she returned from England in 1895, Ida published *A Red Record; Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the U. S.* This book told the inside story of all the lynchings recorded in the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation, including several in Illinois. It revealed how there had been a gross lack of action by state and local governments, and that lynchings had begun to decrease. Her work really had made a difference. Ida continued in her work until she died in 1931.

Our state was privileged to have such a great leader, one of Illinois' first investigative reporters, making a huge difference. Ida spent her whole life trying to improve treatment of blacks and reforming Illinois. She persistently spotlighted what was wrong in society, recording lynchings, writing columns and pamphlets, founding clubs and civic organizations, and investigating intolerable crimes. Moreover, by her example she proved to all that blacks had the same capabilities as

white people, particularly her ability to use the press to speak out against segregation and advance black rights. She pushed for the laws to be enforced against people who participated in racial hate crimes; this was a great service to Illinois. Overall, she moved the Emancipation Proclamation closer to its fulfillment, not what segregationists wanted it to be, but what Lincoln wanted it to be.

In conclusion, because of newspaper writer Ida B. Wells' articles on lynching and segregation, readers in Illinois discovered the seriousness of these subjects, causing them to take action. At one time in her life, Ida B. Wells commented about how the fight for segregation will never be over. Sadly, this has proved true today. Still, though, Ida B. Wells wanted everyone to fight against segregation in their own crusade for justice. No wonder she said "Let your songs be songs of faith and hope." [From Dennis B. Fradin and Judith B. Fradin, *Ida B. Wells Mother of Civil Rights Movement*; Jone J. Lewis, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett* <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/wellsbarnett/a/ida_b_wells.htm> (Aug. 27, 2007); Linda O. McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells*; Angela S. Medearis, *Princess of the Press*; PBS Video, *Ida B. Wells A Passion for Justice*, Dorothy Sterling, *Black Foremothers Three Lives*; Elizabeth Van Steenwyr, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett Woman of Courage*; and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Classics in Black Studies on Lynchings*.]